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ABSTRACT

This description of the student outcomes assessment programs at community and junior colleges in Missouri provides an overview of the programs, a summary of the position of the Missouri Association of Community and Junior Colleges (MACJC) on assessment, and brief reports on the assessment programs of MACJC members. After introductory comments about the growing concern with educational quality, the paper examines efforts currently being made at community and junior colleges to assess student readiness to learn, guide students in course and program selection, and measure learning outcomes. The next section considers the philosophical foundations of assessment in Missouri, including the MACJC's recommendations for quality assurance. These recommendations support institutional autonomy; the development of a systemwide approach to assessment models based on nontraditional student expectations; the qualities of "assessment" that distinguish it from "testing;" an awareness that outcomes, such as maturity and critical thinking, are difficult to assess using traditional models; institutional improvement; and a phased-in approach. Next, the report provides brief summaries of assessment procedures at nine Missouri colleges. Finally, concluding comments stress that Missouri colleges have, through assessment, become better at demonstrating whether or not they are providing a quality education. (AJL)

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STUDENT OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT AT COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES IN THE STATE OF MISSOURI

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Running Head: Community College Assessment

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STUDENT OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT AT
COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES
IN THE STATE OF MISSOURI

Abstract

An overview of assessment programs of community and junior colleges in the State of Missouri. Included is a description of the Association of Community & Junior College's position on assessment and a summary of specific assessment programs.

The quality of undergraduate education has been the focus of much criticism during the last several years: critics have questioned the integrity of college curriculum and the degrees college students are receiving (Halpern, 1987). "Evidence of decline and devaluation [in higher education] is everywhere" (American Association of Colleges, 1985). As noted by the Secretary of Education, William Bennett (1984, p. 1, 16) "Too many colleges and universities have no clear sense of their educational mission and have no conception of what a graduate of their institution ought to know or be."

As a result of this criticism, there is a call for a reform in higher education -- for higher education to provide a "quality education" for their students. As Keller notes (1983), the quality throughout a colleges' operation is a condition for survival. "Universities must monitor what they get paid to do. It is irresponsible for an institution not to know what the students are learning, what impact the college is having, what suggestions the students have for change" (Keller, 1983, p. 132).

While many are seeking ways to promote excellence in our schools and colleges, few have ever taken the trouble to define excellence in the first place and then develop alternative approaches which may lead to improving the quality of our educational system. Indeed the terms "excellence and quality are

perhaps the most fashionable concepts in education these days" (Astin, 1985, p. ix).

Unfortunately, words alone will not pacify critics of the current educational process in higher education. The American people are demanding some form of accountability for the millions of dollars currently spent on education (Halpern, 1987).

While several solutions have been offered to help alleviate some of these concerns, the solution which may be able to best demonstrate this accountability is that of student outcomes assessment, a process which is gaining momentum and popularity (Halpern, 1987). It is through assessment practices that the educational process may more clearly demonstrate whether or not it is accomplishing what it was designed to do -- that is, produce successful students (Halpern, 1987).

The purpose of this investigation is to describe the students outcomes assessment programs at community and junior colleges in the State of Missouri. Therefore, this discussion will be limited to an overview of assessment programs at the community college level, a description of the Missouri Association of Community and Junior Colleges (MACJC) position on assessment, and a summary of specific assessment programs of current MACJC members in Missouri.

Overview of Assessment at the Community/Junior College

Substantial efforts are being made, at the community and junior college level, to (1) assess student readiness to learn; (2) guide students in course and program selection; and (3) measure learning outcomes (Tillery & Deegan, 1985). Generally, assessment is used as a tool to discriminate for course placement purposes among students with different academic needs (Donovan, 1985). Roueche and Snow (1977) report that 95 percent of community colleges used locally developed placement tests in at least one area. Ribaudo, Roelling and Lederman (1982) noted that 75 percent of their respondents used local tests for remedial placement at the community college level.

Furthermore, some writers were able to link success in remedial programs with success in subsequent courses (Donovan, 1985). Others, (Hoban, 1983) have shown that their developmental students did better in school than students who required no remediation. And after reviewing hundreds of remediation studies, Cohen and Brawer (1982) confirmed that students in remedial programs at the community college tend to have lower dropout rates.

A basic philosophy of assessment at Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) is to help the student to register for the course

in which s/he will be most successful and have a positive experience. In this way it is hoped that success will lead to more successes and perhaps an increase in persistence in reaching the student's goals in school. At the Community College level, assessment testing is most helpful in placing students in math, reading and English courses according to their ability to perform (Losak, 1987).

Studies at MDCC seem to indicate that if a student has good scores on the entry level placement testing s/he will usually be successful in college. Students who successfully complete all necessary college preparatory courses have the same three-year persistence rates as students who begin with no skill deficiencies (Losak & Morris, 1985).

In sum, at the community college level, such assessment programs would first assess the level of incoming freshman and be useful in course placement. Secondly, each institution would also demonstrate the student's success in college using some form of outcome measure.

Philosophical Foundations of Assessment in Missouri

In response to Governor Ashcroft's mandate in 1986 for assessment programs for all institutions of higher education in Missouri, members of the MACJC formed a task force to develop

state-wide recommendations toward establishing student outcomes assessment programs within each community/junior college (MACJC, 1987).

This task force, the Quality Assurance Committee, began meeting on a monthly basis in October of 1986. In July of 1987 the committee issued a report outlining their assessment philosophy, basic guidelines, schedules for program implementation, and objectives to be accomplished. The following is a summary of statements made by the MACJC Quality Assurance Committee . .

1. Institutional autonomy should be guaranteed. The committee agreed with Governor Ashcroft's statement that "governors should call on colleges and universities to implement programs of undergraduate assessment that are appropriate to each institution's mission" (Kappan, 1986).
2. There must be an element of "systemness" in assessment at community/junior colleges within the state.
3. Assessment models based on traditional student expectations should be avoided.
4. There is an important distinction between "assessment" and "testing." While assessment may include testing, many other forms of evaluation, including those which

examine the affective domain, are also part of assessment.

5. It is important to recognize that there are limitations to assessment. Maturity, critical thinking, adaptability, etc., are important outcomes, but are very difficult to assess using traditional models.
6. The primary reason for assessment is to foster institutional improvement.
7. Despite pressure, efforts should be deliberate and thoughtful, and support a phased-in approach spanning a three-year period.

The Quality Assurance Committee of the MACJC felt that these guidelines should provide an umbrella to develop assessment programs to meet local needs. Institutional autonomy should also be guaranteed but programs should be coordinated so that basic criterion are met (MACJC, 1987).

In sum, it was felt that student outcomes assessment has great potential as a tool for clarifying institutional expectations and for increasing student involvement in the academic process when it is used to measure improvements. On the other hand, testing is just a part of an assessment program. Granted, in most assessment programs, standardized tests are generally used for pre- and post- testing. However, this should

only be a start. As stated, "the primary purpose for assessment is to foster institutional improvement" (MACJC, p. 2).

Assessment Practices of Community/Junior Colleges in Missouri

After reviewing documents describing current assessment practices of selected community/junior colleges in the State of Missouri, many similarities were found. However, one could also detect forms of uniqueness which satisfied local needs. The following is a brief summary of the assessment procedures at these colleges.

Crowder College

Crowder College developed an assessment policy for all full-time or degree seeking students beginning in the Fall of 1986. The majority (90%) of the first-time freshman students had taken or were given the American College Test (ACT). However, for the non-traditional student, the ASSET from ACT was selected. (Farnsworth, 1987)

These test scores along with high school performance and career goals information are used as a basis for placing students in general education and/or developmental courses (see Table 1).

In the future it is hoped that some sort of outcome measure could be implemented. The ACT College Outcomes Measures Project

(COMP) and College Basic Academic Subjects Examination (College BASE, from the University of Missouri-Columbia) are being considered to measure each student's progress. Development of the outcome portion of Crowder's assessment program, as with all other community colleges, is tied closely with additional appropriations from the legislature (Farnsworth, 1987).

Jefferson College

Perhaps the most unique assessment program is that of Jefferson College. The faculty and staff there have developed outcome measures appropriate for each of the College's degree and certificate programs. Jefferson College does not give a single, standardized test to entering students (see Table 1). "Instead, specific assessments have been developed to assess the student's ability to function effectively in certain programs or courses" (Selly, 1987).

Currently, Jefferson College administers fourteen different assessment tests for incoming students. The college also has developed procedures to evaluate outcome measures for its twenty-six programs. These procedures in part include: results from state or national certification testing, job placement rates, GPA's of students who transfer to 4-year universities and a 5-year follow-up study (Selly, 1987).

Mineral Area College

Beginning Fall 1987, all first-time, degree seeking students at Mineral Area College will be required to undergo one more of six assessment programs and/or projects. These include ACT testing, College Learning Center Assessment, Entry Level Classes Assessment, Vocational Evaluation Center Assessment, and Departmental Graduate Outcome Expectations (Dickenson, 1987).

At Mineral Area, the ACT testing scores are used for proper course placement in mathematics, English and reading (see Table 1). The assessment data is also used by counselors and advisors to help the student in the course selection process. It is felt that "proper placement not only builds confidence and success, but also helps retention rates" (p. 2).

Finally, departmental chairpersons are developing a document reflecting the philosophical foundations and expectations of student outcomes at Mineral Area College. It is projected that an instrument will be randomly used as a graduate outcome measure, along with random entry level sampling during the 1989-90 academic year, and thereafter, to determine the effect of a Mineral Area College education.

Moberly Area Junior College

Moberly Area Junior College requires an ACT score for all entering freshman under twenty years of age. They also require

students to take the ASSET assessment test for placement in college level English and mathematics courses (see Table 1). Standardized test scores, high school class rank, and early course achievement also have influence on placement (Kropf, 1987).

Moberly Area believes in an "open door" policy as far as access. On the other hand, they also believe that they have the responsibility to assure students have the skills to succeed prior to admission to certain classes or programs. They are also concerned with the quality of their graduates and whether they succeed when they leave, by either completing additional educational goals or by entering the world of work (Kropf, 1987).

St. Louis-Florissant Valley

An assessment center was created at Florissant Valley in October 1983. All students are required to participate in the Basic Skills Assessment program except: those who have already scored above the 50th percentile on both the verbal and quantitative subtests of the SCAT, ACT, SAT or the Ohio Psychological Examination; have completed a two or four year degree; or have previously completed the assessment process (Hurov, 1988).

As with other institutions, the primary purpose of the Basic Skills Assessment is to help in course placement for English, mathematics and reading. Table 1 lists the specific tests used in

these areas. Results of all placement testing are distributed to the academic departments of reading, English and mathematics (Hurov, 1988).

St. Louis-Forest Park

Assessment programs at Forest Park Community College have been in place since 1981 with the established of the Learning Assistance Center (LAC). One of the main purposes of the LAC is to "facilitate the appropriated placing of students in specific courses and instructional programs" (Nelson, 1987, p.1). However, the LAC serves students ranging from the academically disadvantaged to the honor student.

Student's wishing to take more than two courses or take a math, English or reading course, must take the college placement test. The Forest Park Placemnet Battery consists of three tests: mathematics, reading comprehension and English composition (see Table 1).

In sum, it is the philosophy of Forest Park that "students come to the community college from a variety of preparations, experiences and backgrounds. To support student success, the college has developed a series of support placement tests. Proper placement is one of the keys to student success and secondarily, to student retention" (Nelson, 1987, p. 3).

St. Louis-Meramec

Eberle-Mayse (1987) stated the primary goal of Meramec's Assessment program is to determine a student's "readiness" to begin college-level studies... "assessment is the foundation of the instructional process" (p. 1-2). At Meramec, assessment is mandatory for all regular students taking 12 or more hours and for any student desiring to enroll in a writing, reading or mathematics course (see Table 1).

Tenants of Meramec's assessment program are: tests are systematically evaluated; faculty input is provided; choice of test is based on campus needs; local based norms are determined, even when national norms exist; locally constructed tests are viewed and evaluated; and time and cost to administer the programs are reasonable.

State Fair Community College

State Fair Community College (SFCC) began formulating plans in 1986 to improve student assessment. SFCC requires an ACT score for all degree-seeking students and those enrolling in a math or English course (see Table 1). In addition, developmental testing has been implemented to identify students who are unprepared for college-level work (Lovell, 1987).

The combined results of the ACT test and the departmental testing are used for course-level placement and to refer students

to the Developmental Laboratory where further remediation is offered.

Additionally, since 1986 enrollees at SFCC have been asked to respond to two statements: "My primary goal in attending SFCC is? and, I expect to accomplish this goal by..."

It was felt that is was more realistic to assess retention and student success using the students initial educational goals than using the same criterion for all students.

According to Lovell (1987) these evaluations serve as a basis to improve the quality instruction, to improve services to the student body, monitor student achievement, to evaluate total programs, to evaluate administrative and staff personnel and to identify educational needs in developing long-range plans for improvement.

Trenton Junior College

The establishment of an assessment program at Trenton Junior College is not as far along as would be hoped, due to local conditions and lack of state funding (Thexton, 1988). The latter situation, that of lack of state funding, is characteristic of all of the community/junior colleges contacted -- especially with the implementation of an outcome measure assessment.

Again, the basic purpose of Trenton's assessment program is course placement using ACT scores along with other standardized and in-house examinations (see Table 1).

Discussion

More and more pressure is being placed upon institutions to demonstrate accountability and to ensure their students are receiving a "quality education." As a result, community and junior colleges in Missouri are implementing assessment programs which help students to better reach their academic goals. At the community and junior college level student outcomes assessment can: One, show the level of student readiness to learn; two, provide guidance to students and advisor in course placement in reading, English, and mathematics; three, demonstrate student success and measure learning outcomes; and four, provide an atmosphere which fosters institutional improvement.

The assessment process in the State of Missouri is much more than testing -- testing being just a part of the overall assessment strategy. Assessment programs in Missouri provide opportunities for colleges to improve course selection and placement, help students better identify skill deficiencies, identify high-risk students, reduce attrition rates and demonstrate competency of graduates. And thus help meet a major

objective of the community college -- to ensure that each student is successful in achieving their academic and personal goals. Effective assessment practices can aid the community college in this endeavor.

In sum, it is through the use of student outcomes assessment that the educational process in higher education may be more clearly evaluated. Institutions in the State of Missouri have become better in demonstrating whether or not they are providing a quality education for their students through student outcomes assessment measures.

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TABLE 1

Student Outcome Assessment Programs by
Missouri Community Colleges

	ENTRY LEVEL/ PLACEMENT EXAMINATION	READING SKILLS EVALUATION	MATHEMATICS SKILLS EVALUATION	ENGLISH SKILLS EVALUATION	STUDENT OUTCOME MEASURE
Crowder College	ACT required for all freshmen, ASSET for non-traditional students.	ACT or ASSET scores used, additional testing as needed.	ACT or ASSET scores used, additional testing as needed.	ACT or ASSET scores used, additional testing as needed.	Evaluating ACT COMP and College BASE from the U of Missouri-Columbia.
Jefferson College	Course placement according to academic background.	Nelson-Denny Reading Test (given to all students).	In-house test or National Association of Teachers.	English Minimum Essentials Test and a writing sample.	Program specific, field testing College Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP).
Mineral Area College	ACT, placement in reading, math and English.	Nelson-Denny Reading Test.	In-house, supplied by St. Louis-Meramec.	In-house instrument.	Developing a student outcome measure evaluation program.
Moberly Area Junior College	ACT required; ASSET used for course placement.	ASSET reading score.	ASSET math score.	ASSET English score.	Considering College BASE and ACT COMP.
St. Louis-Florissant	Basic Skills Assessment (CTBS) after admission.	Nelson-Denny Reading Test, forms C and D (Nursing, forms E and F).	Florissant Valley Diagnostic Math Test.	CTBS language mechanics and expression examinations.	Informal discussions, looking at CAAP from ACT.
St. Louis-Forest Park	Forest Park Placement Battery.	Standard Diagnostic Reading Test, 3rd Level, Form G.	In-house mathematics test.	Essay on broad general topic.	Informally discussed.
St. Louis-Meramec	Assessment & Placement Services for Community Colleges (APSCC).	APSCC	Dekalb, GA Mathematics Test	English portion, APSCC.	Informal discussion College BASE from the U of Missouri-Columbia.
State Fair Community College	ACT, scores used for course placement.	Nelson-Denny Reading Test.	Departmental math knowledge test.	Departmental writing test.	Assess retention and student success using the student's initial educational goals.
Trenton Junior College	ACT, scores used for course placement.	Nelson-Denny Reading Test used when necessary.	ACT score as well as in-house evaluation.	ACT score as well as in-house evaluation.	Not formally addressed.

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